

# Program Notes

*In fact I imagined Elijah as a real prophet through and through, of the kind we could really do with today: Strong, zealous and, yes, even bad-tempered, angry and brooding—in contrast to the riff-raff, whether of the court or the people, and indeed in contrast to almost the whole world—and yet borne aloft as if on angels' wings.*

—Felix Mendelssohn, 1838

*Elijah* takes for its inspiration one of the most spectacular plots in the entire canon of choral masterworks. The play opens suddenly, as the prophet appears without warning to Ahab and proclaims a dreadful curse: For the king's corrupt and wicked governance, the people of Israel will suffer years of drought. As God withholds rain from their crops, so too will He turn a deaf ear to their prayers. An unmistakable "curse theme"—a series of falling tritones, the most remote and dissonant of musical intervals—limns Elijah's awful words. It will return again and again throughout the work.

The overture depicts the famine with a rumbling theme, a pang of hunger that begins quietly, in the pit of the stomach, but rapidly intensifies into a general crisis. In the opening chorus and duet that follow (No. 1–2), the people of Zion prostrate themselves before God. The loyal Obadiah exhorts them to "rend your hearts, and not your garments," reminding them that salvation lies within, not in the observance of hollow ritual (No. 3–4). But his words are unavailing—the people stand ignored, mocked, with only the fond memory of God's mercy to sustain them through their bleakest hour (No. 5).

Meanwhile, Elijah is spirited away to a distant brook, where he is fed by a flock of ravens and serenaded by angels (No. 6–7).

God dispatches him to the house of a widow woman to the north, who finds her food miraculously multiplied. When her son takes sick, Elijah revives the boy, delivering a tender reminder that God's mercy is to be found in prayer alone (No. 8). One of Mendelssohn's signature choruses, "Blessed are the men who fear Him" (No. 9), rounds out the scene.

After three years of torturous drought, Elijah materializes again at Ahab's court (No. 10), this time bearing a challenge. Jehovah (represented by Elijah) and the animist god Baal (worshiped by Ahab's queen, Jezebel) will receive sacrifices from their respective champions. The god who rains down fire to consume the sacrifice will be the one to reverse the course of the famine. Goaded by Elijah, the priests of Baal call upon their god three times, all for naught (No. 11–13). As the idolaters look on in stunned silence, the prophet humbly beseeches the true God (No. 14–15) to reveal His power.

As Elijah draws himself up to full strength, his sacrifice is destroyed by an otherworldly blaze of light (No. 16). Prostrate with awe, the Israelites reaffirm their allegiance to the Lord of Abraham. Baal's priests are slaughtered (No. 17). With one bold stroke, Elijah thus exposes their error and smashes their hold over God's chosen people. A mournful alto

aria (No. 18, “Woe unto them”) ends the scene with an unexpected note of pathos.

Obadiah reminds Elijah of his people’s suffering (No. 19) and implores him to end the drought. Twice, using the same words Solomon used to consecrate the Temple, the prophet calls upon God’s aid. Each time, his youthful lookout reports back an absence of weather. Able to stand the suspense no longer, Elijah summons God a third time. A cloud forms on the horizon, “like a man’s hand,” and the people flock with excitement to witness the oncoming storm. The torrent is unleashed, and all Israel rejoices (No. 20).

Part One of *Elijah* gives us a prophet confident in word, mighty in deed, and victorious over all foes. With Part Two, we witness the character of Elijah in a different light, as he struggles against feelings of isolation, futility, and the ingratitude of the people on whose behalf he has intervened. In this inner journey—a journey that asks the question “is belief really enough?”—lies the true meaning of the work. Mendelssohn opens with a virtuoso soprano aria (No. 21) that laments the heedlessness of God’s people but, reinforced by a strong chorus, also girds the listener against the anxiety that lies ahead (No. 22).

Jezebel, aggrieved at the loss of her priestly caste, poisons the people against Elijah (No. 23). The prophet was, after all, cosseted away from the ravages of the famine, and now he would dictate to the king himself: Isn’t it possible that this was all witchcraft, designed to achieve worldly ends? A fickle mob, incited by the queen, sets out to hunt down and destroy Elijah (No. 24). Stunned at this sudden reversal of fortune, the prophet flees. Given safe passage by Obadiah to the desert, he slinks into exile (No. 25).

In proclaiming the drought and blocking any hope of prayer to relieve it, Elijah denied the Israelites both physical and spiritual sustenance. Now it is he who is cut off by a thankless and backsliding nation, purposelessly wandering the desert. In the epic aria “It is enough” (No. 26, a direct tracing of “Es ist vollbracht” from Bach’s *St. John Passion*), he begs God to end his unworthy life and afterward sinks into a dejected sleep (No. 27).

At this point, Mendelssohn springs some of his most inspired and delightful stagecraft. With two of his most sublime choruses (No. 28, “Lift thine eyes” and No. 29, “He watching over Israel”), the listener suddenly takes the vantage point of the angels who encamp around the slumbering prophet. The composer hit upon the idea for setting “Lift thine eyes” as an cappella trio while walking along the Birmingham industrial canal flush from the oratorio’s premiere. For Mendelssohn, the search for beauty and order was compelling even in the grittiest of surroundings.

An angel appears and orders the sullen prophet to Mount Horeb, where he is to remain in a cave for forty days and forty nights (No. 30). Elijah raises his fist to God, demanding a vanquishing miracle; none is forthcoming. The angel counsels patience (No. 31), and the chorus lights a beacon of endurance (No. 32). Another angel stands him up and dusts him off to prepare for a visitation from the divine (No. 33).

The entire natural world quivers at God’s approach (No. 34), as Mendelssohn depicts the storm, the earthquake, the lightning and the ferocious wind with all the expressive certainty of the great landscape artist he surely was. But God is not to be found in all this tumult. He is instead

best known in the calm, intellectual world of revelation, the “still small voice”. With perfect serenity, an angel-chorus enfolds the listener, conducting us, along with Elijah, into a magical space where the mystery of life is revealed (No. 35). The angels bear a message from God himself: Thousands of good men, hidden away by Obadiah and other loyalists, stand ready to come to Elijah’s aid; he is to return to his task (No. 36). Refilled with enough kindness and understanding to last him a lifetime, Elijah bids farewell to the plane of action (No. 37) with one of the great melodies penned by this or any other composer.

In the biblical account, Elijah’s departure from this world was equally as sudden, and quite a bit more exciting, than his appearance. In a stunningly original chorus (No. 38, “Then did Elijah the prophet break forth”), Mendelssohn depicts the prophet’s ascension in a chariot of fire, the mantle that flutters down to land on his apprentice the only tangible remainder of his earthly existence. (Elisha’s astonishment at his master’s disappearance is made palpable with the sudden A-major transition on the word “Lo!”)

The final scene—complex of the oratorio offers a meditation on the place of Elijah in both the Old and New Testaments—the correspondences to Jesus (No. 39, with its invocation of the famous parable of the weeds), his role in the prophecy surrounding the end of days (No. 40, with its portentous rendering of the “last trumpet”) and his role in restoring God’s people to their sacred covenant (the final chorus—quartet—chorus triptych). Having begun the evening in a land cracked with drought, we are bidden in the end to “come to the waters,” to share in a common understanding. The curse theme is strongly recapitulated at the “Amen,” this

time to be thrillingly, irrevocably resolved by the composer. With this grand, unifying gesture, the curtain falls. Thanks to Mendelssohn, Elijah’s crisis of conscience, and his spiritual victory, have been ours.

*Elijah* was the culmination of Mendelssohn’s life’s work, the triumph of authenticity over brilliance. Around the stark figure of the quarrelsome prophet, and with uncommonly robust writing for the chorus, the composer was able to construct a self-sustaining musical drama of the kind he had long sought, and on a scale that was to become the norm for later Romantic composers. On hearing *Elijah*, we are invited into a complete and internally consistent musical world, with its own language, *leitmotifs* and uniquely imaginative orchestration. In the end, against all the disparagement of Mendelssohn’s music and musical values by later generations, the brutish claims of “despicable oratorio mongering” and “kid glove gentility”, the dramatic immediacy of *Elijah* stands as a sharp reproof.

With *Elijah*, Mendelssohn gave the oratorio form a coherence and propulsive energy so often lacking in the genre without sacrificing a shred of the required dignity. After his death, the oratorio would go into abeyance in favor of the grand synthesis of the arts advanced by Wagner and his partisans. Still, this “oratorio to end all oratorios” offers us a no less valid synthesis that links faith and reason through the use of universal, classical forms. Addressing us in musical language of respect rather than dominance, appealing to commonality rather than division, and advancing a calm, rationalist world view, it endures as a resounding—and deeply personal—argument against philistinism in any age.

—John Maclay